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ABSTRACT

The principal is the key to realizing educational reform on the K-12 campus, being the catalyst who creates a culture of enhanced teaching and learning. This atmosphere encourages adults and children to express their ideas, thoughts, and concerns about the education process. The paper present results from three collaborative studies undertaken in El Paso, Texas. Findings suggest that fostering relationships and valuing people are major components of a campus climate that supports authentic learning. The paper attempts to clarify the perceptions of teachers, parents, and students--stakeholders whose voices are traditionally silent when "experts" gather to discuss and define the role of the principal. (Contains 29 references.) (DFR)

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Reconceptualizing the Role of the Principal: Giving Voice to the Silence

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Reconceptualizing the Role of the Principal: Giving Voice to the Silence

Introduction

The principal is the key to realizing educational reform on the K-12 campus, for s/he is the catalyst who creates a culture of enhanced teaching and learning. Such an atmosphere encourages adults and children alike to express their ideas, thoughts, and concerns about the education process. This paper presents results from three collaborative studies undertaken in El Paso, Texas, a large US city along the United States-Mexico border. Findings suggest that fostering relationships and valuing people are major components of a campus climate that support authentic learning.

In this paper, it is understood that principals must possess the technical competencies needed for the job. In fact, between the years of 1920 and 1960, the American principalship was defined primarily by managerial and technical skills (Cuban, 1988). In the early 1980's, instructional leadership came into vogue as educators recognized the importance of guiding the interactions between teachers and students during the course of instruction. Inservice efforts aimed at developing the instructional leadership of principals became increasingly common (Murphy & Hallinger, 1987). A decade later, it became evident that the campus climate pervading the instructional process was a crucial factor in setting the stage for successful teaching and learning. Increasingly, practicing principals find themselves engaged in the management of public relations as they interact with faculty, staff, families, and the community in building an effective learning climate (Hallinger & Hausman, 1994). The shifting focus of the principal's role, therefore, can produce conflicting messages that campus leaders must filter and prioritize while responding to multiple layers of authority.

Not only must principals deal with conflicting messages and multiple layers of authority, but leaders who work with diverse populations such as those in this study must also address the concerns of very diverse constituent groups. The region of the United States in which this study was conducted is part of a rapidly growing, binational, bicultural community. El Paso's population of more than 700,000 people makes it one of the largest cities in Texas, and one of the state's fastest growing metropolitan areas. Ciudad, Mexico, directly across the Rio Grande and adjacent to El Paso, has a population of over 1.2 million inhabitants. Together, the two cities create a binational metropolitan area of approximately two million people.

El Paso is at the forefront of demographic trends that describe the rapidly changing face of US society. Demographically, the city is estimated to be more than 70% Hispanic and approximately 20% white non-Hispanic, with a small number of African-American and Asian residents. Almost one-fourth of El Paso's populace is foreign born, and more than half of the region's households speak Spanish as the primary language. In addition, an estimated one-third of the adult population is functionally illiterate. El Paso is one of the poorest metropolitan regions in the United States (Parra & Daresh, 1997).

Keeping this demographic description in mind, the findings from these studies suggest that key stakeholders view *campus climate* as a major factor impacting desirable educational change. Although strong teachers are capable of transforming their individual classrooms, the *principal* instills hope and enthusiasm in the community of adults and children by recognizing their potential gifts and providing opportunities for growth. It is the principal, then, who fashions the campus climate by inspiring the entire learning community of teachers, students, and their parents. This paper attempts to clarify the

perceptions of teachers, parents, and students—stakeholders whose voices are traditionally silent when "experts" gather to discuss and define the role of the principal.

Literature Review

The principal's role is fraught with ambiguity. Site-based decision making has placed principals in the position of working with teams of adults to make collaborative decisions. Alvy & Robbins (1998) point out that "juggling the many roles of the principalship has become more complicated in this site-based era because [one] must use a more collaborative leadership model and serve as a community liaison, instructional leader, and the chief financial officer" (p. 60). Olson (2000) writes about new demands and pressures that are altering administrators' roles, quoting one New York superintendent who states, "I think the demands of the job have exponentially increased…And, frankly, the public is much more demanding than it used to be" (p. 14).

Richardson, Lane, and Flanigan (1996) point out that principals have been bombarded by the changing demands and responsibilities of their role. Principals have found themselves lacking adequate knowledge to address the challenges of facilitating administrative and school visions; assuring that students are learning; relating to faculty, staff, and community in a cooperative environment; and implementing new strategies to accomplish change.

Administrators move at a frenetic pace in brief, fragmented, intense segments of time isolated from peers with whom to discuss their work, plans, and experiences. Though administrators do their daily work in an organization which is tightly bureaucratic in many areas but loosely coupled in others (Weick, 1976), core functions are accomplished with relative autonomy from supervision. Reitzug and Cornett (1990)

suggest that administrators have less opportunity and more need to explore and to make explicit their practical knowledge and belief systems.

With multiple forces operating to redefine the role of the campus leader, many administrators struggle to make sense of the conflicting demands of their position. Additionally, research reveals a systematic tendency for persons to perceive the expectations of others to be closer to their own than they really are. Lipham and Hoeh (1974) suggest that principals should attempt to determine the extent to which they misinterpret the perceptions of their constituent groups. Studies of organizational roles reveal that ineffectiveness and inefficiency are due less to differences in expectations that are out in the open and understood than to those that are underground and misunderstood (1974). It is the premise of these researchers that campus administrators who gain a clearer understanding of their teachers', parents', and students' perspectives regarding the principal's role will emerge as leaders who are more credible and effective in their professional practice.

Why include the teacher voice?

Whereas significant research on the principalship has been conducted for decades, much remains to be explored in the area of the principal-teacher relationship. Blase and Kirby (1992) noted that most researchers have focused on teachers' and principals' perceptions of the types of power principals use and have correlated those perceptions to variables such as teacher satisfaction or loyalty. In contrast, Blase and Kirby studied the teacher-principal relationship by asking teachers to identify strategies used by effective principals to influence their teaching.

Although understanding other people's perceptions may seem an impossible task, Combs, Miser, and Whitaker (1999) emphasize that educational leaders must learn empathy in order to understand why people behave as they do. The teacher study contributes to this effort by providing an avenue for principals to develop some understanding of the perceptions of the group they must work with most closely from day to day—teachers.

Why include the parent voice?

Parents bring a different perspective to school leadership, due to their own experiential base (Massachusetts State Department of Education, 1990). Bolman and Deal (1997) stress that the decision-making process is improved when leaders examine issues from various "frames." Parents certainly bring an additional "frame" or "way of seeing things" to the table. They want to participate in the democratic revitalization of our society through interaction with school leaders; moreover, they are interested in developing and supporting principals, with the ultimate aim of creating more vibrant and exciting schools for their children. Because schools are public institutions (Shirley, 1997), legislators, state, and local school officials need to view parents as legitimate partners in their children's education. Schools cannot create the needed improvements alone. The process is so complex and multi-faceted that success is likely to come only with the collaboration of stakeholders most impacted by public education.

Why include the student voice?

Schools have traditionally embraced students as lower organizational participants, passive recipients of educational programs planned, organized, and implemented by those who pay scant attention to their values, concerns, suggestions, or advice (Lipham,

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Rankin, & Hoeh, 1985, p. 199). Few schools involve students in substantive decision making, although many acknowledge them as an important stakeholder group (Blase, Anderson, & Dungan, 1995, p. 139). Focusing on students and their perceptions is not meant to suggest that their view is the final and conclusive word concerning school change. Certainly, no stakeholder constituency has all the answers. However, if schools are called upon to provide an equal and quality education for all, students need to be included in the conversation; and their views, along with those of other key informants, should be used to reflect critically upon school reform. As Nieto (1994) points out, "Perhaps students have important lessons to teach educators…it is us [educators] who must listen more carefully" (p. 420).

Methodology

The traditionally neglected perspectives of teachers, parents, and students were examined through triangulation of multiple methods. Triangulation incorporates various strategies to reduce systematic bias in data, thus helping researchers guard against the accusation that findings are simply an artifact of a single method, a single source, or a single investigator's biases (Patton, 1990). "By combining multiple observers, theories, methods and data sources, [researchers can hope to] overcome the intrinsic bias that comes from single-method, single-observer, and single-theory studies" (Denzin, 1970, p. 313).

One version of triangulation, theory triangulation, examines an issue from the perspectives of various stakeholder positions with different theories of action, recognizing that it is very common for divergent stakeholders to disagree about goals and means of attaining those goals (Patton, 1990). Theory triangulation, then, underlies the

selection of teachers, parents, and students as participants in these collaborative studies to collect empirical data on the perceived role of the principal.

Methodology for the Teacher Study

The qualitative methods of participant observation and interviews were used in the teacher study portion of this project. The researcher was employed as a faculty member at an urban high school with a long tradition of academic excellence and recognition. In addition, the principal was regarded by both the school district and community as highly effective. This framework allowed the school to become an instrumental case study (Stake, 1995) of teachers' perceptions of the principal's role. Participant observation offered a means to become familiar with those issues in a single setting, with an opportunity to inform the search for understanding of the larger phenomenon. In addition to daily observations of interactions between the principal and most of the schools' 100 teachers, the researcher conducted individual interviews with ten faculty members at the school. Interviewees included teachers purposively selected to represent a cross section of experience levels and subject areas.

Methodology for the Parent Study

The researcher created a survey instrument, (Stakeholder "Nput" Administrator Profile, SNAP) to examine the perspectives of both principals and parents regarding the principalship, with the notion that principals who possess keener insight into parental expectations of the leader's role will be in a better position to develop a collegial network of support with parents. Items were developed using prior qualitative data (parental focus groups and Delphi technique with campus administrators) and quantitative data (survey

methodology) collected through earlier projects. Demographic items were added to the instrument to aid in analysis.

Surveys were mailed to every public and private school principal and assistant principal (62% response rate, N=313) in a two county region served by an educational service center along the US-Mexico border. The identical survey (provided in both English and Spanish) was sent home through students enrolled in six schools within the same area, with a parental response rate of 40% (N=547). Students were selected from multiple grades and different sections of the region in order to ensure ethnic and socioeconomic representation of the population.

Data were examined for univariate and multivariate outliers, multicollinearity, and univariate and multivariate normality. Cases that contributed greatly to multivariate non-normality were deleted. The analysis was conducted using robust statistics since data remained slightly non-normal after these procedures were completed. Using both exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis techniques, the researcher first developed the hypothesized administrator and parent models with calibration datasets. Validation samples were later used to confirm the final models.

Methodology for the Student Study

The researcher engaged in a qualitative study whereby 34 eleventh and twelfth grade high school students participated in fifteen individual interviews and three focus group sessions held on three different high school campuses located in El Paso, Texas. The campuses were purposively chosen (1) to be inclusive of each of the city's largest school districts and to represent varied regions within the municipality, and (2) as reflections of the city's diverse socioeconomic and ethnic population.

School A was chosen for its nationally recognized status. Selection of School B was based on student performance with regard to the state-mandated criterion referenced test; while School C reflected a high percentage of student participation on college entrance examinations (SAT, Scholastic Aptitude Test and ACT, American College Test) over the past five years.

In addition, principals at each of the three high schools were perceived as effective leaders by their peers and colleagues. Since the researcher's goal for this exploratory study was to procure student perceptions of the role of an effective principal, outstanding schools led by strong administrators were purposively selected. It was recognized by the investigator that data from this project would provide baseline information for future work.

Criteria for selection of student participants included (1) students who were capable of articulating their viewpoints, (2) students who were willing to share their ideas regarding the role of an effective principal, (3) students who reflected the region's demographic diversity by way of socioeconomic status and ethnicity, and (4) students who included not only those with strong academic backgrounds, but also those with special needs, and the "more average" student.

Results

Teacher Study

Preliminary results of the teacher study seem to confirm the premise that persons in different positions in the organization have differing views of that organization. Perceptions of workers are subjective, formed through such personal "filters" as their role in the organization, their value orientation, and context of situations in which they are

involved (Jorde-Bloom, 1988).

Teachers wanted a visible, accessible principal. This was evident in the larger contexts of leadership, where participants said the principal should "know the school;" climate, where they said the principal should be visiting classrooms; curriculum and instruction, where they indicated that visiting classrooms shows that principals "know what is going on" in classes; and communication, where they felt visibility translates to "listening" and approachability.

Mutual trust and respect between teachers and principal, and on the part of the principal for diverse groups within the school, were essential. Teachers said that being able to count on honest, consistent behavior and being included in decision making contributed to a productive climate, a better-acquainted faculty (even one that feels like a family), and to effective communication. Praise, as an extension of respect, also contributed to their perception of effective leadership.

The principal's behavior was vitally important to teachers. They had strong comments in the area of example-setting as their way of illustrating ethics and integrity issues. They recalled with a touch of bitterness principals they could not count on. They struggled with curriculum and instruction, always desiring more control over professional decisions. The principal's ethnicity and gender were characteristics the teachers in this study firmly rejected as hiring criteria; instead, they looked to the ability of the principal to understand and work with the school's population. Teachers yearned for principals who communicate with them through respectful listening, who are approachable and keep confidence with them, and who recognize and attempt to serve their professional development needs. As they strive daily to do the world's most important work

—teach children—they desperately want their principals to understand their personal and professional needs.

Parent Study

Data from principals/assistant principals and parents were analyzed through multi-sample confirmatory factor analysis. The first hypothesis (the same number of factors for the two groups) was rejected, precluding further work with the multi-sample approach; therefore, the administrator and parent datasets were analyzed separately. An administrator model and a parent model were developed using the calibration datasets, and then confirmed with the validation datasets. Fit indices verified an adequate fit of the data for both the administrator and parent models.

Four constructs emerged from the administrator data and were labeled by the researcher as follows: (1) Promoting Democratic Participation, (2) Creating the Inviting Culture, (3) Ethical Practice, and (4) Flexibility in Professional Practice. The parent data produced only three constructs: (1) Creating the Inviting Culture, (2) Ethical Practice, and (3) Understanding Families' Beliefs. A number of items loaded on both the "Creating the Inviting Culture" and "Ethical Practice" factors for the two groups; however, the loadings of other items onto different factors for the administrators and parents revealed distinct differences in the ways the two groups view the principal's role.

The data showed that campus principals agreed more strongly than parents with every survey item except "The principal should give the same weight to ideas from all members of the school community (faculty, staff, students, and parents) when designing a plan to achieve the school's goals." It seems evident, therefore, that parents want a voice in substantive matters concerning their schools. For those items tapping the administrator

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construct "Flexibility in Administrative Practice," campus leaders responded with a definite preference for adapting decision making to the situation at hand, whereas parents seemed to prefer predictability in the principal's practice of his/her administrative duties.

Administrators construed the "Inviting Culture" construct as one where courtesy and respect were paramount. Parents agreed, noting that they valued principals who were both visible and approachable, and who made an effort to greet students and their families during daily interactions. Parents, however, added democratic participation to the "Inviting Culture" construct, making it clear that they wanted to engage in important discussions regarding their children's education.

Both parents and principals viewed the "Ethical Practice" construct as maintaining consistency between their words and actions, standing behind those who do the "right thing," and working with ineffective teachers to improve their professional practice. However, parents interpreted the "Ethical Practice" construct more broadly than did administrators. Parents appeared to believe that *ethical* leaders should take into consideration the many ways a family's values may impact their interactions with the school, whereas principals viewed that item as contributing to the "Inviting Culture." Parents perceived principals as having an *ethical* responsibility to spend time developing relationships with community members; principals, though, viewed this item as a "Democratic Participation" variable. The fact that parents interpret these items as part of the "Ethical Practice" construct seems to indicate that they take these issues very seriously.

Student Study

The qualitative data from the individual interview and focus group sessions were coded and analyzed for emergent themes across each school. Students at all three campuses involved in the study stated that the principals at their schools, principals considered to be effective: (1) interacted with students, (2) built an optimal learning environment, (3) communicated effectively, (4) fostered meaningful relationships, and (5) solicited student input.

Students emphasized that principals have to earn acceptance into the high school culture through mutual trust and respect. Students did not view the authority of the principalship as legally or institutionally granted. Rather, if campus leaders are to gain access to student thoughts and ideas, they must be approachable when students need information or advice, supportive when students attempt a new skill, delighted when students master a concept, interested in attending various student functions, and equitable in their treatment of all adolescents. Students believed that effective principals are those who accept them for who they are and channel their energies and talents in a constructive direction. This process is a sensitive, time-consuming task that requires patience and diplomacy.

Students in this study wanted to be involved in decisions and held accountable for their implementation. Students believed an effective principal creates a risk-encouraging environment: if students find they have made an inappropriate decision, then they want campus leaders who stand ready to guide and advise them. Students realized that in order to learn and grow and participate in the democratic process, they will occasionally fail;

however, they appreciate campus leaders who provide a safety net to help them get back on their feet.

Participants felt that communication between principals and students must be based on mutual respect. Through shared dialogue, trust is built and students begin to lower their wall of initial suspicion. Principals who are perceived as "walking the walk" encourage meaningful conversations between themselves and students on topics of shared interest.

These high school participants attempted to merge preconceived ideas about the principal's role with the reality gained from their own observations. They believed that effective campus principals were passionate about their work, a passion derived from the heart. Students appreciate leaders who love working with kids, and who are not afraid to share personal experiences, offer advice, or show support. In short, students want principals with the courage to reveal their human side by caring for them, nurturing them, and believing in them.

Discussion

The stakeholders most closely involved with the day-to-day activities of the school—teachers, parents, and students—have strong opinions regarding the role of the principal. Prior research conducted by the investigators (Daresh, Gantner, Dunlap, & Hvizdak, in press) showed that principals in this southwestern region viewed their role more in line with technical competencies; however, these three collaborative studies revealed quite a different picture. Teachers, parents, and students simply expected the technical skills to be in place and did not question their existence. Rather, their concerns focused strongly on climate, ethical issues, and communication. It is the premise of these

researchers that principals who develop the ability to work with traditionally neglected stakeholders (i.e., teachers, parents, and students) will benefit from emerging collegial and supportive relationships that, in turn, could lessen the burden of these overworked and overstressed campus leaders.

Although the stakeholder groups participating in this collaborative project acknowledged that the principal is the key agent in producing effective schools, educators and stakeholders alike are concerned that it will be difficult to maintain consistently strong campus leadership into the future, given that the job has become so multi-faceted and complex. Louis and Murphy (1994) found that principals were having considerable trouble addressing the instructional functions they had learned over the last decade due to the fact that "... the managerial demands of reform were swamping school administrators" (p. 273). In addition, findings from a 1998 study conducted by the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) and the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) showed that fewer quality candidates are applying for openings in the principalship. These findings are a source of worry since it is estimated that 40% of US principals are preparing to retire over the next decade (NAESP & NASSP, 2000). Interviews with principals across the nation confirmed the notion that "Long hours, too little pay for the demands of the job, and too much stress are the main reason for this reluctance to take on the tough job of school leadership. In effect, the issue is not a shortage in number but rather a shortage in the quality of applicants. The American public needs to hear this 'wake-up call'" (Olson, 2000, p. 10).

Tucker (as cited in Olson, 2000) of the National Center on Education and the Economy suggests a possible solution for this challenge through dramatically changing the role of the principal as it is currently defined. Tucker believes the principal's job description is in transition. "Who needs that job?...What we're talking about here is not training principals for the job that exists—because I do think it's an impossible job—but training people who can actually change the job" (p.15). Murphy (as cited in Olson, 2000) concurs with Tucker, pointing out that many principals lack both the time and training needed to fulfill their multiple roles. "It's not the principal's fault. The problem is, one day you wake up, and the rules of the game have changed" (p.14).

The teachers, parents, and students in these studies indicated that they want principals who build caring, ethical relationships, and who foster a climate that nurtures teaching and learning. These results confirm the historical evolution of the principalship discussed in the introduction to this paper (i.e., technical manager to instructional leader to "public relations" expert); however, adding coalition building on top of the instructional leader and managerial functions has made the job too demanding for one person to effectively handle alone.

These researchers, therefore, propose a reconceptualization of the role of the principal, not unlike Usdan's (as cited in Olson, 2000) proposal that schools consider having two leaders..."somebody to handle the external end of it, and somebody to handle the instructional end of it" (p. 15). An example of this is illustrated in the San Diego, California schools through the teaming of Superintendent Alan D. Bersin, a Yale-trained attorney, with the Chancellor of Instruction Anthony J. Alvarado, an educator with decades of experience in New York City schools. Mr. Alvarado provides the educational

leadership for the district while Mr. Bersin provides the technical, managerial expertise (Olson, 2000). Additionally, the concept of dual leadership was demonstrated by Principal Lynn Babcock who recalled her former position where she served as principal in partnership with a colleague designated as the instructional leader. "[T]hat was wonderful, because then I was able to focus more on the managerial, everyday kinds of things that get in the way of being an instructional leader…and she [the instructional leader] was able to work with teachers on just that—on instruction" (Olson, 2000, p. 15).

It is these researchers' assertion, then, that if the principal is to serve effectively as a technical manager, an implicitly understood function of the campus leader's role; if the principal is to truly function as an instructional leader, one of the overriding interests of teachers; if the principal is to spend time developing relationships, one of the ethical concerns of parents; and if the principal is to engage in meaningful dialogue with students, a major point made by high school participants; then, a restructuring of the principal's role is in order. This restructuring could be depicted by dividing the job into two positions, while maintaining a seamless connection between the two leaders.

Our formative conceptualization of the dual leadership role involves one person who tackles the technical, managerial functions of the principalship (e.g., budget, scheduling, cafeteria, building maintenance, busing, vendors, grants), and his/her partner who functions as the instructional leader (e.g., curricular materials, technology and curriculum integration, state and local systems of accountability, professional development of faculty), and who builds coalitions among constituent groups. It is important that the two partners come together to work on overlapping tasks; for example, to determine how the budget should be allocated to support instruction.

We recognize that this reconceptualization of school leadership raises many questions. Should the two leaders be given equal pay?...accorded equal status? How should the structure of American schooling change to accommodate dual leadership? How should the dual jobs be defined? Should the two leaders be recruited as a team, two people who know one another and already work well together? These questions can only be answered as school districts search for innovative, dual campus leadership models, and as scholars and practitioners engage together in reflection, critical dialogue, and future investigative studies. This alternative conceptualization of the principal's role is deserving of further research.

It is the position of these researchers that the evolving nature of the principalship makes the concept of the single leader an antiquated and outdated icon. As Greenleaf (1977) noted, the concept of the lone chief is ineffective in institutions grappling with complex problems that require deep reflection and cooperation among players—a description so characteristic of American schools. Everyone needs the close influence of colleagues, persons without fear of speaking frankly, and persons willing to criticize and challenge in an air of collegiality. The teachers, parents, and students in this study all affirmed their desire to dialogue with school principals on critical issues impacting the educational experiences of the learning community. These kinds of interactions can take place only with school leaders who are available, approachable, and willing to give voice to the silence.

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